

Finance Director
David Roussel-Milner
24th April 1980

cc Deputy Secretary-General

Ethnic Arts

While not wishing to prolong this exchange, I feel I must reply to your memo dated 21st April in response to my own of 15th April 1980.

My 'message' may be summarised as follows:

1. In common with most black people, experience tells me that, as a result of their history and education, Europeans find difficulty in viewing Ethnic Arts in the same terms of 'High' and 'Low' as they apply to their own arts.
2. The existing Council's advisers are mostly incapable of adequately assessing Ethnic Arts. It was John Cruft who said he was "underinformed".
3. Because of the Council's attitude towards support of amateur work (with which I do not necessarily disagree) Ethnic Arts are in a "Catch 22" situation. Until adequately funded, it will not be possible to move to professional status and, because of the presumed negative kudos for private patronage as well as the vicious cuts in Government grants to other organisations who might have otherwise given support, aid from other agencies is now almost non-existent. Yes, I do plead for special consideration for development funds for Ethnic Arts.
4. Excluding National Companies, Awards to Artists, Touring and Education, in 1979/80, 0.34% of Music commitments and 0.49% of Dance commitments were to Ethnic Arts, while the Council meanly reduced the recommended £25,000 to £20,000 for the 1979 Notting Hill Carnival. At the same time one client, L.F.B., admitted in the press that it discriminated on the grounds of colour in the employment of artists; to my knowledge no action was taken to persuade this company to change its policy.
5. Unfair as any accusation of racism levelled against the host community may seem, I believe that subconscious as well as overt racism is endemic in English society, particularly in the Courts, police forces, prison service, legal profession, education, employment and housing. The Council might find it increasingly difficult to persuade the Black community in the future that its decisions never contain an element of even sub-conscious racism.
6. The "few but roses" policy is frequently seen as "roses for the few", and Black people believe that they will always come at the end of any list of the many.
7. I think it is a tragedy that the Yiddish Theatre no longer exists and I wonder what damage has been done to that very rich culture as a result.

I would respectfully request that my views be at least noted at the forthcoming weekend Directorate and in any subsequent Council discussions.

DRM/ES

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BLACK & ETHNIC ARTS ARCHIVE

Finance Director

David Roussel-Milner

15th April 1980

Ethnic Arts - Council Meeting 30th April 1980

I am immensely pleased that the Council recognises that there is a difference between Community Arts and Ethnic Arts, but I am concerned by terminology such as "High Art" and "Mass Art". It has been the experience of most non-Europeans that "white" people have always been prepared to apply the term "High" to at least part of their own cultures but rarely willing to recognise this classification in respect of the cultures of other peoples. This attitude reached its "height" when Hitler outlawed Jewish Arts as being unacceptable for true Aryans. The same attitude is still exhibited in Southern Africa where the phrase "maintenance of standards" is applied. Indeed as far as Africa is concerned, in order to justify the horrors of the slave-trade, it has been pretended that no civilisation existed in Africa before the arrival of Europeans, so that African art is viewed all too often as only primitive.

Why have Ethnic Arts been classified so frequently under Community Arts? It seems to me that Anglo-Saxons (in the cultural sense) have difficulty in viewing Ethnic Arts as pure art forms, even though different, which is not to suggest that anyone is consciously racist but that we have all grown up in a society which considers itself inherently superior. This has influenced us all, including those who are the products of societies which produce what is now called "Ethnic Art". In that so much Ethnic Art in England appears to be the product of groups of people, frequently non professional, it has so far seemed proper to include it under the Community Arts head. Does the Council now recognise, however, that this classification fails to serve the needs of Ethnic Art and Artists in a multi-racial and multi-cultural society?

For me Art is the original expression of things and ideas in a medium most suitable to the artist. This definition does not differentiate between good and bad art, neither does it distinguish between aesthetic and functional art; nor, indeed, between primitive and civilised art, amateur and professional, individual and group, popular and minority, European and Ethnic. The term "original" recognises that the painting of a cathedral ceiling, for example, was the work of the artist who planned and sketched the drawings rather than the work of the apprentices who actually did the painting under his direction. Similarly the architectural art of a great building is the work of the architect rather than that of those who labour to erect it. By the same token a costume band in a Trinidad Carnival is recognised there to be the work of the designer rather than that of the seamstresses, wire benders and dancers who take part.

Community Art is distinguishable because it is the art of a whole group of people working together to create a group interpretation of things and ideas in a variety of art forms. It could be argued that a chamber orchestra without a conductor or, alternatively, a jazz band with each member doing his 'own thing' are each involved in a community art form, but that only serves to confuse the issue. Were the Council to decide against more than nominal support for Community and Ethnic Art on the grounds that it is more frequently amateur than professional, it would be an honest approach, but the result would be that a great deal of Ethnic Art would never have the opportunity to develop in the way that European classical art forms have developed by means of temporal and spiritual princely patronage leading to the governmental and industrial subsidy of the 20th Century.

The lack of knowledge of and the inability to assess adequately Ethnic Arts may be a stumbling block to adequate provision. One of the Council's most eminent advisers, when reporting on an African dance group, recently wrote "I am underinformed on the techniques." If the Council is to do justice to the requirements of Ethnic Arts it must not remain underinformed and should be seeking the advice of those who are expert in the various fields. There ought to be a deliberate attempt to introduce every section of the population to the arts of every other section, so that each area of Ethnic Art is not seen to be for members of the particular ethnic group no more than European Art is seen to be for Europeans only. While it is not part of the Council's brief to concern itself with the problems of race relations, I believe it should take note of the possible side effects of aiding Ethnic Arts or of not doing so (I need hardly mention the recent events in Bristol).

To return finally to terminology of "High" and "Low" (sorry I should say "Mass"), can the Council obtain resource to sufficient expert advice on the arts of minority ethnic groups in the community, and is the Council prepared to think of, for example, Chinese painting, Indian dance, African woodcarving and West Indian music as "High" art? And, of course, I have left out Greeks, Turks, Gypsies and so many other groups.

I would be most grateful if you would present my views to the Council.

JS

DRM/TJ

ARTS COUNCIL: INTERNAL MEMO

To David Roussel-Milner

From Finance Director

c.c. Deputy Secretary-General

Date 21st April, 1980.

Ethnic Arts - Council Meeting 30th April

I was very grateful for your minute of 15th April on this subject although I am not altogether certain what is your exact message. The fact that the Arts Council has largely followed a "few but roses" policy does not necessarily mean that only "WASP" culture is alone subsidised, nor that the Hitler/South African examples you cite have anything to do with the Council's assessment of what is "good" or "bad" art.

Subsidy goes to a tiny fraction of art. If you take the extensive interest in Gilbert and Sullivan alone - hundreds of Societies throughout the country with D'Oyly Carte at the top of the pyramid - and we don't even subsidise that! We just about swallow an occasional "Flanthe" at the English National Opera. If Gilbert and Sullivan were Chinese or African, there would be marches down Piccadilly about our ignoring them!

Similarly, the thousands of Drama Companies throughout the country (civic, amateur, professional, west-end) and there are only 60 or so we subsidise plus smaller subsidies to the "fringe" and "touring" companies ... our standards are (supposedly) very "High".

I have been to brilliant (subsidised) exhibitions of Chinese paintings; I have been to many superb performances of Indian dance ... but these are about the same percentage of what is "good" in the "WASP" arts. Are you not perhaps asking for special consideration of Ethnic arts, so that not only its best is subsidised? The English might do the same for more English opera than "Peter Grimes" at the Royal Opera House; or the Irish for more Irish plays than "Playboy of the Western World" at the National?

If the Yiddish Theatre were still in existence in the East End, there would be very special pleading to ensure its survival now. You rightly differentiate between the survival and development of ethnic arts ... there might also be a difference between the best of a certain type of art and what becomes universally accepted and acclaimed. For me, one of the criteria of what is good is what can easily be accepted universally as something of worth. Shakespeare's "King Lear", Chinese ivories, Wagner's "Tristan", Tolstoy's "War and Peace", African wood-carvings, Ibsen's "Peer Gynt", Picasso's "Guernica" - one could go on, but these transcend language, race, creed and colour barriers. What the Arts Council has to do is ensure that the creative environment is developed in which this sort of excellence develops and survives in performance. There are many other agencies to cope with all the other aspects of the arts.



AF/JE

ARTS COUNCIL: INTERNAL MEMO

To Finance Director
 From Deputy Secretary-General
 Date 24 April 1980

ETHNIC ARTS

As you know, I have been following with some interest your exchange of minutes on this subject with David Roussel-Milner. I do not want to comment at length, but I would like to raise one point on your memo of 21 April which seems to me to go right to the heart of the matter. Your suggestion that what is good in art is what can easily be accepted universally as something of worth is intellectually very attractive: certainly if it is true, the problem of ethnic arts is reduceable to a question of standards and excellence within a framework of intellectual and aesthetic parameters with which we must definitionally be already familiar (even if, pace Jack Phipps, the familiarity is in my case instinctive); so seen, the problem is no problem at all.

But, if I may say so, I think this is the arts equivalent of conviction politics. It requires a leap of faith for which the evidence is scanty. It may be that some manifestations of creative inspiration are of such power that they transcend not only political, linguistic and social boundaries but also the most profound differences of culture and tradition. But I know of little reason to suppose either that they are many or that, even among the few, the capacity for response and the nature of response are in any way common to all peoples.

The alien culture with which I am most familiar is traditional North African Islam. From my own experience, that cultural tradition finds it exceptionally difficult to assimilate, eg, figurative visual art (which it regards as blasphemous); considers 'Cry the Beloved Country' of far greater literary merit than 'Midsummer Night's Dream' (whether in translation or not); and would consider 'St Joan', 'Lucrezia Borgia' and 'Gloriana' as incomprehensible at a quite fundamental level. This is to say nothing of music, where I have by far the greatest difficulty with your argument.

If, as I believe, your basic proposition is fallacious, the problem of ethnic arts is not only a real one, but is also intellectually and philosophically highly complex - particularly for the Council, whose principal raison d'être subsists in its claim to rational judgment on the basis of sophisticated criteria, each of which falls to the ground unless supported by empathetic experience and knowledge.

I grant that one may have the sense of distinguishing a "superb" performance of Indian dance. But it is fair to ask how you justify that kind of judgment. I cannot myself see that the justification could be other than by reference either to a comparison of apparent technical skill with other Indian dance performances or to a comparison

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ARTS COUNCIL: INTERNAL MEMO

To
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with essentially technical aspects of Western dance performances. But a proper assessment also needs to take account of such matters as the appropriateness and skill of the hand gestures traditionally used in Indian dance and the fidelity of a particular performance to the relevant legend, say the legend of Vishnu. Suppose that at a performance of Festival Ballet's 'La Sylphide' Evdokimova's performance was marred by sloppy positioning of arms and hands or that Schaufuss' re-working of the whole ~~and~~ represented a travesty of the Bournonville tradition: how much reliance would one place on an assessment which failed to take any account of those factors?

To take another example how can a culture in which the exquisite economy of miniaturism has no place in artistic tradition properly appraise the inscrutably poignant beauty of a haiku? Would one know where to start? I would even doubt whether one could learn where to start.

I am in danger of writing an essay on the subject, which was not my purpose. Clearly, however, there is enough difference between us to look forward to an interesting discussion at the weekend Directorate (though the paper I have prepared on ethnic arts rather takes for granted the kind of issue raised here).

Finally, I should just point out that ethnic arts will not be a subject for Council this month, but more probably next month.

RCP

RCP

ETHNIC ARTS: A SPECIAL CASE?

At the last Council meeting, Usha Prashar made the forceful point that Ethnic Arts as a category of artistic activity were quite separate from Community Arts, even though some Ethnic Arts activity was of a Community Arts kind; and Council agreed that Ethnic Arts was a subject to return to in its own right at a future meeting.

2. The Council's present support for Ethnic Arts is open to criticism on three grounds:

- i. Taking the size of the ethnic population as a yardstick, ethnic arts are grotesquely under-represented in the Council's expenditure - and seem likely to become even more so since the ethnic population is growing disproportionately quickly;
- ii. the great majority of Council, Panel and Committee members and of the Council's outside advisers are ill-equipped to assess quality and needs in the Ethnic Arts;
- iii. the general assumption (voiced by Anthony Quinton at the March Council and not there disputed) that the traditional culture of ethnic minorities is best sustained in the home and that the Council's prime responsibility to them is to guarantee their right to be introduced to the best in Western culture is at odds with the pluralist approach to ethnic minorities which has now almost entirely supplanted the integrationist/assimilationist approach in the policy thinking of the Home Office and other major bodies concerned with ethnic minorities.

3. These criticisms are not equally valid. So far as the first in particular is concerned, it is quite legitimate for the Council to argue that it is not in the business of equalising its subsidies by reference to population, but of sustaining quality wherever it is found: the fact that only a minute proportion of the Council's expenditure goes on Ethnic Arts reflects a situation in which professional activity in Ethnic Arts is only a minute proportion of total professional arts activity. But the strength of this rebuttal is at least to some extent diminished by the second and third criticisms, both of which are harder to contest.

4. Many of those concerned with ethnic - and particularly black - minority populations would add two further points, each of some force. One is that the cultural traditions of those populations are much less reliant on the professional artist than is the European cultural tradition. They therefore face a major and very difficult adjustment in coming to terms with the system in which subsidy is widely available for artistic activity but is wholly restricted to the support of the professional: the Council typically requires its clients to demonstrate their appeal to a paying audience before considering subsidy on the basis of the quality of the product, whereas the ethnic artist can often only establish himself with his own community on a quite different basis.

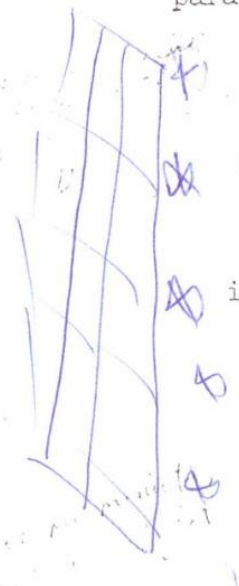
5. The other is that the whole concept of ethnic groups as minorities is simplistic. They constitute a minority nationally, but there are a growing number of areas where they constitute the majority. Those areas are not merely the Brixtons and St Pauls of the big cities, but include

Very true
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(particularly in the North of England) whole towns. The largest Church of England primary school in Bradford has only two non-Muslim pupils - and neither of them is white! It is in these areas particularly that Ethnic Arts can be said to deserve special attention unless whole communities are to be culturally deprived by the standards of comparable indigenous communities.

6. It would plainly be possible for the Council to stand firmly by the principle of responding to established professional excellence in resisting any pressures for change supported by arguments along the above lines. Such a position would be logically entirely defensible even though it would risk being accused (no doubt on occasions in fairly emotive language) of ignoring the special artistic needs of ethnic minorities and of failing as a national agency to play its full potential part in helping to tackle the wider issues of race relations.

7. On the other hand, if Council did decide that it should, so to speak, "do something" about Ethnic Arts, it is not immediately obvious what scope for action might be open to it. The vogue phrase to describe what used to be called positive discrimination is "affirmative action", which sounds unimpeachable until one wonders what it is that the action is intended to affirm. The kind of things the Council might reasonably be expected to aim for in the next 2 or 3 years are comparatively modest. They might include:

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- i. Increasing the number of people on Panels etc and on the staff who are knowledgeable about Ethnic Arts;
 - ii. designating an existing Committee (presumably either Regional or Special Applications) and an existing officer as having a special overview of Ethnic Arts;
 - iii. improving touring opportunities for established Ethnic Arts groups;
 - iv. advertising the Council's training schemes in ethnic minority presses;
 - v. giving a limited number of pump-priming grants on an experimental basis to support the professionalisation of the best non- or semi-professional work in Ethnic Arts and to improve standards.

Plainly the last of these is the most controversial. Even if it were accepted, the present financial outlook would probably preclude any very significant moves in the next two or three years; but we should not overlook the considerable goodwill value of even a small advance in this direction.

8. In considering the kind of paper to be put forward to Council, it would be particularly helpful to have colleagues' general views on the case for and against affirmative action and on the possible scope for it. It would obviously be sensible to discuss a draft paper in due course with Usha Prashar before circulating it to Council. It might also be worth discussing it with RAA Directors: the case for doing so would be quite strong if there were any question of recommending Council to adopt v. in the preceding paragraph.

Finance Director
David Roussel-Milner
9th May 1980

cc Deputy Secretary-General
Dance Director

Ethnic Arts

I attach a copy of the Dance Director's report on the African dance group, Aklowa, which illustrates all too well the concern about assessment of Ethnic Arts.

While the European eye may feel that technique is important in any dance performance, it is not necessarily a requirement of African dance. Rhythm is, of course, very important. To be concerned that funds should have been made available to Aklowa, which, by the Dance Director's criteria, did not produce "professional standards", indicates why it is necessary for assessment to be made by those who understand the basis on which to report on Ethnic groups and, perhaps, for applications to be processed by an Ethnic Arts officer on the advice of those who understand the art form involved. I understand that a number of existing dance advisers were also similarly concerned.

Two parallel situations spring to mind, the first in dance itself. I believe that many avant garde dance groups are worried that they are assessed by people according to the criteria for classical ballet. And secondly, the minority communities continually object to the intelligence of their children being assessed on criteria applicable to English children, with the result that there is a disproportionate number of our children in schools for the educationally subnormal.

DRM/ES

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C O N F I D E N T I A L

CONFIDENTIAL

TO: DANCE DEPARTMENT, ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN

DAP 1
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Report on Dance or Mime

From: Jane Nicholas

Please circle as applicable:

ACGB Officer

Adviser

Co-option

Observer

RAA

Company/Artist: AKLOWA

Title of Performance:

Professional Arts & Schools Conference

Venue: CAMBRIDGE

Date: 1.4.80

Working in the main conference room, with an audience of about sixty people sitting on three sides of a floor area of not more than 12 - 15 ft square, this was not the easiest of dance spaces. However, with the drums arranged above them on a raised platform at the end of the room they all coped admirably.

Felix Cobbson has a strongly avuncular manner and I felt was treating his adult audience of educationalists and professional arts people, as if they were his more normal audience of school children. However, most people seemed to love it and a large proportion joined in the dancing when requested to do so.

The drumming seemed entirely professional and was very exciting in certain items, while the dance, which is apparently authentic folk of Ghana is very limited and done with little expression from the women though rather more from the men. I enjoyed it as a colourful spectacle, and appreciated that presentation was entirely professional (and well costumed) but the dance content required no technique, only energy and rhythm. I am a little concerned about the fact that we have helped this group with project grants yet are demanding professional dance standards from all the other dance groups seeking funds.